Whiskey instead of Vodka

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Whiskey instead of Vodka

About

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Summary: This is a (most likely) short story in the Zone, in which a nameless Stalker and an operator known as Whiskey meet under (un)lucky circumstances. I saw 70% of this in a dream and people convinced me of writing it down so expect not-so-serious and funny stuff. - Credits for the cover go to: @sims_lt

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Chapter One: Won't you tell me your name?

You know what? This job is more boring than most people might think. At least most of the time. Sure, when they tell you about 'facing terrifying mutants, unscrupulous bandits, and deadly anomalies,' you think it's a lifestyle where there are no breaks. That's only true at first.
When you're new to the Zone, terror lurks around every corner, and you can't understand the veterans who can sit around a campfire and drink themselves to sleep. You sleep two hours a day, mainly because any slight noise sets off your internal alarms. It's fear, it's just fear.

"Sigh..."

When, like me, you're already considered one of those veterans... it gets quite a bit more boring. Not because there aren't dangers, but because if you've made it this far, it's because you've understood how the Zone works. You know what you have to do and what not to do, you know how much respect you need to show to be rewarded, and you know how to perfectly gauge threats when you see them from afar.
The only thing capable of bringing you genuine excitement and enthusiasm is some really big and dangerous assignment, or... or something spectacularly unexpected. The Zone is an interesting mistress, and she always has something for everyone. Once, a veteran who has already retired told me that the more you get used to life here, the bigger the surprises that await you. That's what he said the night before he robbed me of a good portion of my savings and escaped the Zone forever. Old bastard.
Things that happen when you trust someone from Freedom.

"No, not this way either..."

That day, I found myself in Red Forest. It was an almost routine assignment, although not badly paid. A guy from the bar asked me to get him a few Night Stars. There were other places to look, but I wanted to try my luck in the forest. Once, I heard about a guy who found four of them in the same day in Red Forest. Ah, but I never have that kind of luck...
Bolt after bolt, I made my way around the anomalies.
It's the experiences that make the veteran, not the equipment, so I was very comfortable with my Sunrise Suit and gas mask. Hanging from my chest was my beloved AS VAL, which rattled every time I threw another bolt towards another

Vortex.
In the ten years I've been living in the Zone, I've been invited several times to join this or that faction, but I always said no. I don't like getting into conflicts with people; I just want to do my job and preferably only have to raise my rifle against mutants. Believe it or not, even though I don't get along with them, bandits don't usually attack me. It has to do with the fact that I once did some work for Sultan; it brought me trouble with Duty, but we soon reached an agreement of mutual non-aggression.
Right now, I maintain perfect neutrality. Well, except for those white lunatics with whom it's impossible to have a dialogue. Allow me to return to what I was telling you.
Navigating around a single Vortex isn't difficult; the problem arises when there's more than one in the same area. It's suffocating to have to circle around a ten-square-meter patch of land just to find the safe path that allows me to enter. I loathe those Vortex fields.

"There was action here..."

The trees around the cluster of anomalies bore gunshot marks that looked fresh. It was barely 9 am, so I assumed someone had been pursued in the early hours. Whoever it was, I lamented the poor soul's fate.
With another step to the right, partially entering a bush, my foot touched something soft.

"Hm?"

I thought it might be a sleeping dog, so I quietly drew my HP-35 from its holster and aimed downward, waiting for the animal to make the first move before shooting. I would feel bad attacking someone who's asleep, even if it's a dog.
... but nothing happened. I started to grow impatient. A dog is just a dog, it wasn't that big of a threat, but I also didn't want to lose a finger or two for being careless.
I nudged that soft thing hidden beneath the branches and leaves of the dense bush again with my foot. And nothing. It didn't move.
I grew tired and gave it a gentle kick.

"Nothing..."

I sighed with relief and bent down to pull it out from under the bush. Now, I assumed it must be a corpse, from which I could retrieve any valuable items that might have been left.

"You were the poor soul being pursued, weren't you? I'll take your things. You won't be needing them anymore, and it would be a waste if..."

But when I put my hands on that body and pulled it forcefully towards me,

exposing it to the morning light filtering through the trees, I quickly withdrew my fingers.
It was a woman. That, in itself, was an extremely strange sight.
I stood there dumbfounded for a few seconds, my gaze unfocused. In my many years in this place, the times I'd encountered women could be counted on one hand. Most of the time, they were operators who came to the Zone with some research group and left within a few weeks. I only met a female Stalker once, although I haven't seen her in a long time.
When I snapped out of it, I looked around and remembered my situation. Red Forest is no place for an unconscious person. Damn, the fact that her body hadn't already been torn apart by snorks was a miracle.
I looked down again and breathed slowly, then placed two of my fingers under her nose and felt the slightly warm air brush against my fingertips. That, in a way, made it worse - for me.

"...trouble finds me where I least seek it."

Another glance around.
I scanned from her feet to her head. Her attire wasn't typical for the Zone. I took her arm and twisted it a bit...
The rule is: if it's a bandit, I leave them be. If it's a mercenary or a soldier, I slap them and tell them to leave. If it's one of those white lunatics, I shove them into the anomaly. If it's anyone else, I gently wake them up and ask what happened.
But that woman didn't have any patches.
What to do then? How to proceed?
Unconsciously, I shook her arm gently, but there was no response.
If she was still breathing, it was purely because those who pursued her had given up, or perhaps they thought she was dead. I stopped for a few seconds to ponder, then searched for any wounds on her body but... no, nothing. She was unharmed.
My instinct told me that this woman must belong to the first group of women in the Zone I mentioned earlier, in which case, it wouldn't be a problem for me to offer her a little help. I'm not a bad person and... I could always ask for money later for the services rendered. You never see a rifle like the one that rested by her side beneath the bush here, so I was certain she would be one to generously reward her savior with a fat stack of cash.
With that, I made up my mind.

"I'll tell the client there was no luck today in artifact hunting."

And so I stood up - with that girl hanging from my left shoulder like a market bag while I held her legs with my arm (only then I realized she was not exactly in the short side). It wasn't the most elegant way, but it allowed me to use my pistol if any trouble arose.
It was a long journey, and I had to take the long way to avoid running into any other Stalkers trying to make a living.

I don't like trouble, nor do I like having to give explanations.
I try to live a somewhat tranquil life.
No one bothers me in my hideout. I must be one of the only men in this place who can afford to sleep soundly in an abandoned house, far from any base, without worrying about being robbed in the dead of night.
The problem was that the journey from Red Forest to my hideout, located somewhere between Yantar and Rostok, wasn't particularly easy, and it felt longer when I had to carry a person almost as tall as me. I can only say that once I arrived home, with the sun setting, I threw that blonde onto the bed, unslung her weapon to set it aside, and also dropped my rifle to the side, I lay down on the floor, back against the wall, and took a well-deserved nap without even taking off my mask. I'd deal with the details later.
This relatively quiet life softened me in the end.

. . .

Man, wasn't that a big mistake.
I have a habit of letting my own biological clock wake me up. The body is wise, and it knows when it's time to move. That day, however, I was awakened by the muzzle of a rifle of Czech origin banging against my mask.

"I don't get it."
". . ."

It wasn't the first time I had been woken up with a gun pointed at my face, although the light in those blue eyes was new: it inspired a slight confusion, as if she was only holding that rifle against me out of pure protocol.

"I understand keeping me alive to get information out of me, but I don't understand the part about leaving my weapon within my reach."
"It's-"
"No, no. You can't talk yet."

She made a relaxed gesture with the index finger of the hand holding the fore grip.

". . ."
"Thank you for not killing me, but you shouldn't be so confident. When I heard about the Mercs roaming this place, I imagined them to be more competent."

I wanted to try speaking again, but that mouth of fire touched my mask again as soon as I raised my head a little.

"Where are my comrades?"
". . ."
"You can speak now."

"Finally. First of all, I'm not a mercenary, and I don't know what your problem is with them. Second, I found you alone in Red Forest, lying next to an anomaly. If it weren't for me, you'd be being digested by a dog's stomach right now."

I'm sure my voice sounded somewhat accelerated. I'm not usually like that, but for some reason, the brain likes to rev up when it feels on the brink of death. Immediately after saying that, I brought my left arm forward while pulling the fabric over my left shoulder with my right hand.

"You see? I'm not a mercenary. Just a loner, nothing else."
"Oh..."

Those celestial lights widened a bit, and the gun twisted just a little. I didn't expect it to be so easy, but soon I understood the reason.

"It's the same patch our contact here has..."
"Contact? I knew it, you come from outside. Moreover, I'm going to guess: you're here to serve as escorts for a group of clandestine researchers who fund themselves with untraceable income."

She blinked perplexed. I could tell her pupils were trying to find my eyes through the transparency of my mask.

"How-"
"Because it's always the same. Can you lower the gun now?"

It took her a couple of seconds, but she nodded slowly and stopped threatening me. Seeing her from below while she stood made her height even more apparent.

"Who's your contact?"
"It's a guy who's always wearing sun- no, even if you both belong to the same faction, I can't reveal that info."

She didn't extend her hand to help me up. Admittedly, that disappointed me a bit. That's what helping strangers gets you.
Once I stood up and stretched my sore back (I hate sleeping on the floor) I took the route of starting over.

"So, I know what you're doing here now, but who are you?"
"Call sign Whiskey. I didn't come alone, but with three other companions."
"You mentioned mercenaries before, were they the ones who attacked you?"

The house is small, and it's almost empty. The only bedroom has nothing more than a bed, a bedside table, and a single window that's already boarded up. As I spoke, I made my way to the kitchen, but she didn't move from her spot.

"I believe so, they were dressed in blue, and their weaponry was... different from

what those with your patch carry."
"Yes, they were mercenaries."

It didn't take me more than half a minute to return from the kitchen with a can of tuna, a roll of bread, a bottle of water and a can opener; she was sitting on the bed. What caught my attention the most were her eyes. Since she had stopped being hostile towards me, she hadn't stopped stabbing me with that gaze full of curiosity, like that of someone observing an animal they'd never seen before.

"... what is it?"
"Won't you tell me your name?"

That's a sensitive topic, to me.

"When I arrived here, the guys at Cordon named me Bobba Psycho, but I hate it with a passion so I don't use it. And, as a rule, we don't use our real names here, so call me however you want."
"....."
"What is it now?"

She said nothing, and slowly looked down onto the ground. She brought a hand to her face and covered half of it that I could see. Gradually, her breathing became a bit agitated... she was doing her best not to laugh.

"B-bobba..."

One would expect me to get angry, but I was already used to it.
By that point, even ignoring it was easy.
Letting her laugh as she pleased, I walked over to the bedside table to set down everything I was holding. I opened the tuna can and checked that it was suitable for consumption before tearing the bread on the table.
She approached me in silence and leaned slightly over the table. I could see she didn't expect the food was for her when I handed her the can and the bread, and she looked at me with her head tilted.

"Eat."
"Can you afford to waste supplies on me?"
"Luckily, I never run out of food. I have so many cans of tuna I could open a store."

Convinced by my explanation, she began to eat silently, taking small bites.

"Do you have any idea where you should go?"

I leaned my back against the wall as I spoke. A slight, very faint breeze seeped through the boards that closed the window. I glanced sideways outside, between

the gaps in the boards, but I saw nothing but a group of three loners walking away chatting amongst themselves.
She rinsed her mouth with a gulp of water.

"Jupiter."
"Ugh..."

I cursed my luck and slowly tapped the back of my head against the wall.

"You ran all the way from Jupiter to Red Forest?"
"I guess? I just ran while the mercs chased me."
"Ah... it's a complicated journey to Jupiter. I would tell you to find a guide, but being new and without a patch on your arm, you're fresh meat to be swindled. Right now, the best thing you can do is head south and get out of the Zone."

I pointed behind me with my thumb.

"The military will let you through if I tell them to, don't worry about that."

She shook her head.

"I can't just leave like that. I have to go back; my comrades are still there. I don't doubt they're fine, but I can't even imagine the insults if I just leave the Zone without them."
"I understand..."

I scratched my neck in thought, while she continued to scrutinize me, still enjoying that luxurious meal of tuna and bread.

"I'll talk to a guide I know. He's not a bad person, so I don't think he'll try to swindle you, but you should still keep an eye out."

She didn't reply. Not instantly, at least. She took her time to clean the can with a piece of bread and finish her lunch. She took another sip of water, and then threw me a slight smile, lowering her eyelids a bit.

"Why don't you guide me? You don't talk like a rookie."
"Because I don't want to ruin my neutrality with the Mercenaries if we encounter them on the way. The guide I'm talking about already has bad blood with them, so..."

My own voice began to slow down in speed and intensity as the smile faded from the face of the girl sitting on the bed.

"I'm not going with someone I don't know at all in this place is full of crazies."
"You don't know me either."
"You rescued me and didn't steal from me while I slept, that's enough for me. Oh,

and don't you think the mercs will lower their guns when they see me with you?"
"No, they're not like that. One thing is our neutrality, but once those guys accept a job, they'll do anything to complete it. They have a reputation to maintain."

Only then did I notice her annoyance. She... she pouted slightly while turning her gaze to the side.
Aware of what that could lead to, I closed my eyes. I wasn't going to see that convincing face, knowing that it could persuade me into anything with enough charm. Men are like that: weak, and they become even weaker when they've spent years isolated from the outside world solely focused on their work and suddenly find themselves facing the debilitating pressure of a female gaze.
I heard her speak, still not looking at her.

"And what if I told you... that I could pay you enough?"
"..."
"Hm...?"

The second greatest evil that torments men: money.

"How much is 'enough'?"

I couldn't see her, but I could feel her smile. Don't ask me how.

"Enough is enough. If I sweeten the story a bit, we could raise the figure as much as you'd like due to your heroic act of saving an operator who had no chance~"
"You..."

This has happened to other Stalkers. I've heard them talk about fleeting contracts they formed with foreign PMCs, which would pay astronomical sums for jobs that for us, the residents of the Zone, were just everyday tasks. Finally, the day had come for me, but...

"Just... under the condition that you'll do everything I tell you, and you won't shoot unless I tell you to."

A small laugh, and I could only see the end of it when I raised my eyelids.

"I promise to do what I can~!"

. . .

The next thing I knew; I was pulling a very small chest from under the bed. That's where I keep a few mementos and various items. She peered over my shoulder as I opened it and rummaged through the many objects inside.

"Sit on the bed."

She listened to me, and soon I sat down on her left side. In my left hand, a patch identical to mine, and in my right hand, a needle threaded with black thread.

"Oh? Is this going to make me a Stalker?"
"It's not that simple. But it'll be enough for most bystanders to stop staring so much. If you go around without any affiliation, it's like you're shouting 'hey, I'm here, clearly don't belong in this place, and don't know anything about what's going on here.' We want to avoid that."
"If someone talks to me-"
"They won't talk to you. And if they do, I'll respond on your behalf."

That seemed to work as an explanation for her, so she nodded as she watched me sew that patch onto her arm.

"How long have you been here?"
"In this house? A few years..."
"No, no. In the Zone."
"Ah... several years. Ten, I think."
"Don't you miss the world out there?"
"No, it wasn't for me. Some of us don't have a tragic or conflicted backstory. We just feel comfortable here, like- ah, could you stretch out your arm?"
"Like this?"

She stretched out her arm, leaving her elbow very close to my face.

"Yes, just like that. As I was saying, some of us feel good living here."
"I see..."

There was silence, and I only broke it when I cut the remaining thread after finishing applying that patch to her clothing.

"Ah, this will definitely be a surprise for the others when they see it..."

She murmured, more to herself than to me, as she glanced sideways at the patch. Then she asked me:

"Do you have a plan?"
"I do."
"What is it?"
"I don't need to explain it to you. You wouldn't understand it anyway."

She didn't have to tell me anything; that expression on her face said everything she had in mind.

"Don't look at me like that. I say you wouldn't understand because it involves taking routes that are even unfamiliar to those who have lived here for years. For

now, all you need to know is that if you see another person, you shouldn't raise your weapon."
"And if..."
"If you see a mutant, open fire without even notifying me."

I got up from the bed, but she didn't.

"The ones chasing you are the Mercenaries. If anyone, just anyone, saw us on the way here, it means they're slowly but surely getting closer. We need to move."

I stared at her for a while...

...

She wasn't getting up!

"We need to move!"
"I was just thinking... they're Mercenaries, right? And you get along with them. Couldn't you approach them and make a counteroffer?"
"I already told you, they don't work like that. It's..."

I fell silent, bringing a hand to my chin. There was some truth to what she said.

"Hm... I can't convince the mercs, but... you gave me a good idea..."

Only then did I see her jump off the bed, releasing another short laugh, full of confidence and life.
By how much did I beat her? Maybe two inches? She was tall.

"Alright, Bobba! Let's go then. If I spend most of the mission wandering around, talking to a local who has nothing to do with our objective, I'm sure I won't get paid what's due."
"That's your problem, not mine."

I tuned out that name. I wasn't going to let it get to me.
Knowing she was right behind me, I headed towards the door, opened it, and took a step outside...
Indeed, the more you get used to it, the more surprises the Zone brings.